



EXECUTIVE COMPUTING

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‘Little Black Box’ handy, but isn’t a real time-saver

If the success of software products was determined by their names alone, “The Little Black Book” probably would be a big hit. Its name and clever advertising — showing a little black address book tucked in a business-suit pocket — grabbed my attention.

But even though it currently is being marketed to owners of IBM PC and IBM PC-compatible computers — mainly a business audience, I wonder if it really is meant to be a serious program for use by managers or secretaries?

Mundane tasks automated

After installing the program and learning how to use it, I’m convinced that the program’s developers certainly *intended* it to be serious. But I have my doubts about its cost-effectiveness in a real-live business environment.

Here’s what it does:

✓ Keeps track of telephone numbers. The program provides a relatively easy way to enter and update your personal telephone directory on an IBM PC or IBM PC-compatible computer. You or your secretary can enter up to 400 names, addresses and telephone numbers in as many as 30 index categories.

✓ Prints out an address book. Anytime you want, the program will print out (on your computer’s printer) the pages of your own small address book. An attractive cover is provided for the book, along with instructions on how to cut and staple the pages together. In this way, the program and your list of names still has value when you aren’t near your computer.

✓ Automatically dials the telephone. Your computer actually dials the telephone — and you don’t have to exit a program to do so. Because this program resides in memory all the time (it’s “ROM resident”), you can call it up quickly and temporarily suspend any other program. By touching the “Alt” and “D” keys simultaneously, a new screen appears with your most frequently dialed names. At this point you

either can flip through your directory or move the cursor to the name to be dialed. By hitting the return key, it is dialed, and the F-1 (function key) returns you to the previous program.

✓ Prints labels, addresses envelopes. Since the program asks you to provide addresses for each name entered into the system, it's nice to be able to print them out in various formats.

✓ Allows exchange of data with other programs. If you already have a computerized database with your client names, for example, you can enter the data easily into this program. This could save a lot of unnecessary re-keying if the data already is in your computer. Alternatively, if you want to export the data to another database program, that also is possible.

In a nutshell, that's what it does. It takes a simple, repetitive task — finding numbers and dialing the telephone — and automates the function. The key questions, however, are whether it actually is a time-saver and whether it is cost-effective.

Does it really save time?

If you ignore the time necessary to set up the program and enter the names, and the one-time cost of the program itself, can it really save much time for managers or executives?

It *might* save time, depending upon how many times the telephone is dialed each day, and how many people are called repeatedly. In my own case, which I don't think is unique, it didn't offer significant savings.

Although I typically make many calls each day, between 15 and 30, most of these are to people or organizations that I would not want to take the time to enter into my directory — return calls to people who called me, and calls for information, for example. In these cases, I might never call them again, so it actually would take me longer if they were entered into the computer and then dialed automatically.

Furthermore, my telephone already had an inexpensive auto-dial feature for the eight numbers dialed most frequently.

As far as the personalized address book is concerned, I did not perceive it had enough value to even print out. It would have been a waste of time, rather than a savings, to do so.

Good for specialized applications

On the other hand, I can imagine several situations in which the program might come in handy: when an executive secretary constantly dials the same numbers all day long for one or more bosses, when a telephone salesperson regularly calls the same customers, and when a purchasing agent usually deals with the same group of vendors over and over again.

In these cases, the time necessary to set up the program, enter the names and numbers, and the actual cost of the program may be worth it. The key components from Cygnet Technologies Inc. of Sunnyvale, Calif., cost \$119.90 (\$49.95 for the program and \$69.95 for a auto-dialer board and cable for your computer), plus \$29.95 for the optional label program and \$19.95 for the optional file conversion program.

Remember, however, that unless the individual already is using an IBM PC on their desk for another application, the use of an expensive computer in place of an inexpensive telephone auto-dialer could be a terrible misuse of valuable resources.

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